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The Day of the Falling Olives

“Yes, I will be sure to have barley-wheat next time, Publius. Thank you for your business today. Have a wonderful afternoon.” I waved goodbye to my fourth customer of the day before observing the Pompeian market that surrounded me.

The streets were teeming with people out to buy their weekly goods. Many were slaves with baskets of merchandise hanging on their thin wrists. A slight wind to the southeast paired with the sunny sky made today the perfect day for the market. I breathed in the sweet scent of grapes in the stall next to me. Next to the grapes stood a small olive booth, and next to that was a cubicle selling Pompeii’s famous cabbage. I smiled at the sight. Business was booming.

Above the market scene stood Mount Vesuvius, the success behind the famous Pompeian grapes and olives. The fertile soil at the base of the quiet mountain made farming easy and profitable. The grapes were always sweeter when they came from the bottom of the mountain and the olives were always juicier.

A small scuffle came from inside my stall, signaling the arrival of another customer. Plastering a pleasant look on my face, I turned around.

“Oh! Telephoris! What are you doing here?” My wife’s eyes gleamed under the morning sun as she gave me a honeyed grin.

“Salve, Primus,” she said delicately, lifting my spirits higher. “I just came to pick up some almonds from Marcus Aelius Petra and I thought that I would come and see how things are going today. Have sales been good?” I chuckled at that.

“Just go buy the almonds, Telephoris. Money is not your expertise. Let me handle the hard stuff.”

Her head bounced in gentle subordination. She turned to leave before giving me a fleeting glance over her shoulder. I smiled as I watched her figure disappear into the sea of jostling bodies.

I turned back to my stall just as a young woman wandered in looking for oats. She took her time before approaching me to pay.

“Did you feel the shaking last night?” I asked her hoping to make small talk. “It started around ten and didn’t stop for a good hour.” She looked up at me and shrugged passively before taking her oats and hurrying away, obviously not daring to speak to a man who wasn’t her husband.

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I wiped the sweat off my brow with a stray cloth. The intense summer sun shone down on the market signaling the middle of the day. My stall had been empty for some time now, and I was getting desperate for customers. Telephoris was still out buying our weekly supply of food, but I knew that she’d be done fairly soon.

As if she had read my mind, my wife materialized out of the crowd, her arms laden with baskets of fruits, olives, wine, and breads that we would eat throughout the week.

I smiled in greeting and leaned down to give her a kiss before stretching my hand out for any money left over after her shopping. She carefully moved the items in her basket to find the leftover coins before placing them into my outstretched hand.

“What time is it, Telephoris?” I asked.

“It’s almost one o’clock.”

“The market closes in three hours, and I haven’t sold as much as I was hoping to sell.” Telephoris put her arm comfortingly on my shoulder.

“I’m sure everything will be fine.” She cleared her throat. “I was hoping to start make dinner soon. May I leave to go home, or do you need me here?”

“No, no, you may go now. Be sure to have the food ready when I get home.”

“Yes, of course. Vale, Primus.”

I had just opened my mouth to say goodbye when a large blast cut me off.

The ground shook along with the explosion, and I think people were screaming. Or maybe it was Telephoris who had somehow managed to find herself trapped in my arms. The groceries that had been hanging on her wrist lay forgotten on the cobblestones beneath our feet. Olives, grapes, and crumbs of bread spilled from her baskets, but all I could think of was that those grapes had cost me five coins, the olives six, and the bread four.

Telephoris’s small fists pounding on my broad chest brought me back to reality. She was screaming something, but I couldn’t make out any words. She was crying and yelling and I wanted to hold her and tell her to stop, but I couldn’t find the strength open my mouth. I saw her small hand dart out, her pointer finger extended, fear embedded in her eyes. Her other hand grabbed my chin, and turned it sideways forcing me to look at the cause of the commotion.

The mountain.

From the top of the mountain came a column of billowing black residue that was at least six kilometers in height. I looked back to Telephoris, who was still embedded in my arms. I could hear her weeping. With my initial shock gone, I spoke:

“Sh… Stop that now. We’ll be fine,” I said in a soothing tone. “There is nothing to worry about.” She looked up at me, her eyes still wet. “You should go home and start making dinner. I am going to stay out here and look after the stall.”

Panic clouded her eyes. “No, Primus. We must leave. The Gods – Jupiter – is trying to punish us. We must leave here. Please, Primus!”

“Go home, Telephoris. I will fetch you if we need to flee. Right now I need you to leave.”

“But –”

“Go!”

With sniffle and a nod, she was gone.

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Half and hour passed before the scene changed. In that time the billow of what seemed to be smoke had drifted over the city, causing the bright light of the sun to extinguish. Despite the early arrival of night, many were still out shopping in the market. People carried torches and one person had even been kind enough to give me one of his. With my stall lit, people flocked around it trying to get grains for the week.

A few people had left the city, screaming about the gods as they fled, but most stayed. Besides, what harm could a few black clouds do anyway?

It was around quarter to two when conditions worsened. One moment, it was dark and in the next, it was raining stones. The people in the market started murmuring at this unusual event. The sound of their voices rose like a hum of hundreds of bees swarming, gradually growing larger, getting ready to attack. I held my hand out from underneath my covered stall. Within seconds, I was holding a small stone about the size of an olive.

It was light. I brought it up to my face to examine closer. The surface was full of small holes and the thing couldn’t have harmed anyone even if it wanted to. Scoffing, I threw the stone aside.

“Jupiter is trying to punish us with feather-light olives,” I chuckled to myself.

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“PRIMUS!”

I turned.

There stood Telephoris with a pillow over her head and another under her arm. She was clutching something in her hand, but I couldn’t decipher what it was. She was crying, that much was obvious.

I held out my arms, welcoming her into my embrace.

“Telephoris, what are you doing here? I told you to go home and make dinner,” I said while stroking her hair. Putting my hand beneath her chin, I forced her eyes up, “Why did you disobey me?”

“I’m scared, Primus. I think we should leave. The Gods are angry. They sky is falling and we can’t stay! I brought you a pillow to cover your head while we leave. Please, we have to go!”

I laughed. “We don’t have to go. These rocks are lighter than olives. There is no reason to be afraid.”

“But, Primus. This is unsafe. I just know it. We have to get out while – ”

“Shhh, Telephoris. If you’re really *that* afraid, then I’ll make you a deal. Leave the pillow here with me and go home.” I could see her starting to protest so I hurried on, “If this doesn’t stop within an hour, then we will leave. I have a friend in Nuceria Alfaterna who will let us stay. We will meet up there. His house is about twenty kilometers to the East. Leave through the East Gate. Follow the road, and we will meet at his house, okay?”

“Okay. One hour. You promise that you will leave in an hour?”

“If this doesn’t stop, then yes, I promise. Now give me that pillow and go home.”

She reached for the pillow that had been clenched under her arm. Reaching out, I took it from her hand. I leaned down and gave her a kiss “Now go,” I said.

I watched her turn away with the pillow over her small head. Looking down at the pillow that she had given me, I chuckled at my overly-worried, but readily prepared wife.

All of a sudden my eyes focused on something on the floor. Bending down I picked up a small necklace with a gold pendant hanging in the middle. The pendant was intricately designed and I vaguely remembered that it had been Telephoris’s mother’s. I quickly realized that *this* was what Telephoris had been clutching. I went to call her back to retrieve the necklace, but when I looked up, she was gone.

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It didn’t stop. The pebbles rained down for an hour and only because of my promise to Telephoris, I made my way out of the city through the East Gate. By this time more people were leaving the city for the same reason as me; conditions were not getting better. As I shoved my way through the throngs of fleeing people, kept my eyes peeled for Telephoris. When I couldn’t find her, I told myself that she was already on her way to Gaius’s house.

With the pillow over my head and the necklace stuffed inside of the pillowcase and reassurances of my wife’s location in mind, I went East towards Nuceria Alfaterna. It took me about four and a half hours of walking and running, but I made it. My friend, Gaius Porcius Acitus welcomed me in.

“Salve, Gaius. Has Telephoris come yet?”

“No, but I am sure she is coming.”

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She never came. Dirty and tired, I waited for Telephoris to come to the door. For nine hours, I paced the floor of Gaius’s house while he stood by and tried to comfort me. For nine hours, Telephoris’s worn necklace was held securely in my warm palms, and with each minute, I clutched it tighter.

“Where is she, Gaius? Where could she be?”

“She could have gotten lost, Primus. Or maybe she sat down to rest and fell asleep.” He smiled. “I’m sure she is okay.”

“But what if she’s not okay? I need to find her! I need to go back.”

“No, Primus, you can’t. You told me yourself that the mountain exploded. You cannot go back. Even though she isn’t here right now, Telephoris was right; it is far too dangerous in Pompeii for you right now.”

I sent him a glare. “That’s why I need to go back, Gaius. I *need* to find my wife.”

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I stood at the edge of the East Gate as I watched the once prosperous city of Pompeii, my home, vanish underneath olive-sized stones and small specks of gray ash.

*It’s now or never*.

I clutched the tattered pillow and brought it over my head. Images of my wife flashed in my mind, making me more anxious to find her.

*Deep breath in. Let it out. Deep breath in. Let it out. Deep breath in. Don’t let it out.*

I crossed the threshold into the devastated city. The rocks were up to the roofs by this point leaving only rooftops above the ground.

*Three rooftops to the west. Left turn. Five more rooftops. Slight right. Eight more. Past the disappearing temple. Two more rooftops…*

Home.

By now almost seventeen hours had passed since the initial explosion, and the house was barely standing. The roof quivered under the weight of the pumice stones. It was not a question of *if* the roof would cave in – it was *when.*

I scoured the ground for a possible opening to the partially buried house. After about a minute of searching, my eyes landed on a small window above what used to be the tablinum.

*Perfect.*

The window was small. Probably about half a meter tall and one meter wide, but it would be enough for me to wiggle my way through.

I threw the pillow through the open window before making my descent into the stuffy house. It landed with a light thud on the floor next to a small cabinet where I kept all of the money from the cereal stall. I picked up the pillow after shimmying through the window and examined inside it to make sure that nothing was damaged. When I was sure that the necklace remained unharmed, I tucked it under my arm and began my search mission.

The small hallway was quiet and dark. I lifted my hand and began to feel the walls around me, all the while conscious that those very walls might not stand for even a minute longer.

“Telephoris!” I called into the darkness.

Movement.

“Telephoris?”

The earth rattled and several ceramic vases toppled from their spots on the floor. I stopped and listened for another blast from the mountain. The earth shook once more, but no explosion came, so I continued on my quest.

By the time I turned the corner into the atrium of the house, my eyes had adjusted to see faint outlines of objects.

Vases were toppled on the ground, and pieces from the beams holding the ceiling had crumbled on top of the shattered ceramic. There were several cracks in the wall opposite of me, running vertically from the top to the middle of it.

“Telephoris,” I called once more. “Telephoris, where are you? Are you here?”

Silence cut through the air as I continued my hunt for my wife.

I looked through each cubiculum one by one, searching. Finally I came to ours.

The door was closed. My breath was harsh.

With my back to the wall, my left hand reached for the door to push it open. Inside the small room stood nothing but the bed and a tall shelf. I stepped into the room. The bed was unmade. Maybe she was in there. I walked around the room, looking for any signs of my wife. When my search came up clean, I stepped over to the small closet that was on the right side of the room. Pulling the door open, my eyes zeroed in on a lump on the floor.

*Telephoris.*

Shards of a broken vase lay around her head like a halo. A small puddle of blood from a crack in her skull accompanied them.

The ground shook. From the mountain came a large echoing crash that resounded throughout the ruins of Pompeii. The sound itself toppled pillars of stone.

“T-Telephoris?” My voice was barely audible.

Tears started to streak down my face, leaving trails in the ash that covered my skin. My hand shook as I reached out for my wife.

Her skin was cold not her own. The feel of it was foreign. I drew my hand back against the pillow that I held.

*The pillow.*

*The necklace.*

I struggled to open the dirty pillowcase. When I succeeded, I wasted no time in taking the necklace out. The faded sight of my wife’s intricately designed gold pendant made my knees give out and the tears stream faster.

“T-Telephoris. It was all my fault! I should have listened t-to you when you told me to leave. B-but no! I had to be right.” Above me, the roof creaked loudly.

My face reddened as the room grew hotter. My breath was once again harsh. My throat stung painfully with each haggard intake of air.

I crawled towards Telephoris, necklace in hand. Stroking her cheek, I slipped the thin chain around her neck and set the pendant in the center of her chest. I cradled her cracked head in my arms and stroked her bloody hair.

I was broken from my calm state when the earth started shaking again. From somewhere in the house came the unmistakable sound of a roof collapsing from the weight of a thousand olive-sized stones bearing down on it.

I needed to get out.

Sparing a last look at my limp wife, I darted out the door of the cubiculum and sprinted through the house. The ceiling was protesting above me as I ran.

The window that stood above the tablinum was still open. I grabbed a small stool from the corner of the room and started to climb up.

My fingers groped the searing hot stones outside of the house. Stifling a gasp, I refused to let go. My eyes watered as the flesh on my hands sizzled. Attempting to ignore the pain, I tried to yank myself through the small hole in the wall, but the stones that had gathered during my time in the house prevented me from doing so. The air was getting hotter, and the stones beneath my hands were burning through my flesh. Feeling weak, I let go and tumbled to the ground.

There was no way out.

My hands seared with pain. I brought them up to by lips and started blowing air on them in a vain attempt to cool the skin. Instead of cooling my hands, the air burned my lungs. I screamed in pain. It was like I had swallowed a live flame that was dancing inside of my chest.

Taking another breath I felt the fire extinguish only to be replaced by heavy cement. The cement churned slowly in my throat, threatening to cut off my windpipe. The third breath made the heavy feeling in my chest worse. My head spun, and I didn’t know which way was up. I couldn’t feel my chest moving or my heart beating, and my thoughts were a tangled mess.

I gasped several more times for air, trying to squeeze it past the slab of cement caught in my throat. My eyes fluttered and I could hear the ceiling creaking.

I thought back to my wife in the room only five doors down from me. Stumbling to my feet, I staggered down the hallway once more to our cubiculum. My breath was shallow and labored. Telephoris was on the ground where I had left her. Sitting down in the doorway, I looked to the delicate necklace on her neck. Smiling sadly, I took in a small breath of air before letting my eyes droop shut.